

Intelligence in Public Media

Dead Doubles: The Extraordinary Worldwide Hunt for One of the Cold War's Most Notorious Spy Rings

Trevor Barnes (HarperCollins, 2020) 327, bibliography, notes, photos, index.

Reviewed by Graham Alexander

English novelist Trevor Barnes has moved into the nonfiction realm with *Dead Doubles*, his account of how British and US intelligence compromised the Soviet Union's Portland spy ring in the early 1960s. The title itself refers to the Soviet practice of using the birth certificates of deceased persons from Western countries to manufacture fake identities for illegals, or rather, Soviet intelligence handlers working abroad bereft of diplomatic immunity or any formal links to their home country. Barnes recounts the story of how MI5 used lead information in 1960 from Michael Goleniewski, the CIA's penetration of Polish intelligence, to initiate surveillance against Harry Houghton and Ethel Gee, a middle-aged couple living in Portland, England. The two worked there at the sensitive Underwater Defense Establishment. Surveillance operations against the pair yielded additional information linking them to Soviet illegals Konon Molody, Morris Cohen, and his wife, Lona. All five were arrested in January 1961 after Goleniewski's sudden defection. The British later sent all the illegals back to Moscow in exchange for British nationals imprisoned there.

Dead Doubles excels in framing the Portland network's destruction within the wider context of the Cold War, the British diplomatic relationship with the United States, and the British government's efforts to address the resulting blowback, compounded by the arrest of George Blake in 1961. Throughout the first parts of the book, Barnes sets his crosshairs on British intelligence and its efforts to identify, investigate, and eventually arrest the participants in the Portland ring. He does well afterwards to examine the fallout and how this affected individual parts of the British government. Spy scandals in democracies, the book reminds us, are never self-contained events exempt from resultant popular outcry, bureaucratic wrangling, and diplomatic turbulence. The most effective passages in the book focus on MI5's cooperation with CIA on the Goleniewski lead and, subsequently, their collective efforts to examine the backgrounds of Molody and the Cohens, all of whom had lived in the United

States for extended periods. Barnes recounts in appropriate detail the testimonies delivered as part of the so-called Romer Inquiry, a British government-sponsored lessons learned-style inquiry on the ring and how it had successfully operated for several years undetected on British soil. He credibly explains in these sections how the ring effectively delivered some 17,000 pages of documents that included code books, secret orders, and papers on sensitive submarine technology because of poor security practices in the Admiralty and British failure to act earlier on several circumstantial clues suggesting that both Houghton and the Cohens should have been suspected.

Ultimately for this reviewer, the book is a missed opportunity inasmuch as Barnes might have increased its value as an espionage study by telling the story more coherently, undertaking a more detailed analysis of poor Soviet tradecraft, and more closely examining related but less explored intelligence themes. First, other books have examined the Portland case at some length, and the seasoned intelligence scholar might credibly wonder what new ground Barnes intended to cover with his volume. The author makes no mention of earlier work in an introductory section, which instead treats the reader to a thriller-style account of how MI5 surreptitiously removed and examined Molody's safe deposit box inside a London bank.

This event, which transpired relatively late in the bigger story, points to another frustrating aspect of the book: its organization. Barnes admits several times throughout that the continued classification of files related to the case in British, US, and Russian archives makes an authoritative account impossible. Instead, he has chosen a novelistic account that feels jarring instead of suspenseful, as transitions—even from paragraph to paragraph—often feel random. In addition, the book begins by reviewing MI5's role in the operation and then hops awkwardly between players in and out of chronological order. A late chapter on the Cohens, for example, discusses their return to Moscow in 1969 as part of an exchange,

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while the very next chapter reviews their background and recruitment by Soviet intelligence. Barnes could, and should, have shifted the narrative order to create genuine suspense and to make this the kind of book he seems to have wanted.

Barnes omits in-depth discussion of what the case says about Soviet intelligence, a peculiar animal whose contradictions beg closer examination and explanation. The book details the extraordinary lengths to which the KGB and its predecessor organizations went to establish fake identities and legends for their illegals. One especially memorable passage mentions how Molody had his teeth drilled with a prearranged pattern in order to identify him to a dentist in Canada working for the Soviets. A separate meeting in Paris with a contact required a visual parole that required Molody to scratch behind his left ear with a bandaged finger.

The Soviets also used painstakingly developed sophisticated communications equipment with radio bursts designed to elude even the most vigilant British detection equipment. In contrast, the Soviets appeared blind to basic mistakes in tradecraft. The Cohens, for their part, were used as couriers in the United States for numerous high-value assets, including both Ted Hall and William Weisband. They fell under FBI suspicion even before moving to London because of their links to Rudolph Abel. As students of the genre know, this habit by 1950 succeeded in compromising nearly all of the Soviets' painfully built networks in the United States. The Portland case suggests the KGB continued to employ it, however, perhaps for lack of a credible alternative.

Equally glaring, *Dead Doubles* would have benefited enormously by treating several themes with the same insight as the contextual ones listed above. Barnes at no point passes critical judgment of Molody, despite the illegal's atrocious performance. Molody had allowed British

intelligence to observe his meetings with Houghton and Gee on several occasions because of poorly chosen sites and apparent unfamiliarity with the idea of an initial contact point. The British were not even aware of Molody's role until they surveilled Houghton and Gee meeting him in public spaces and restaurants in 1960, where they exchanged packages and talked conspiratorially—all the while ignorant of the MI5 surveillance in their immediate vicinity. MI5 then rolled to the Cohens because Molody parked his vehicle near their house and visited on numerous occasions, going so far as to overnight with them.

Separately, Barnes recounts how in the presence of MI5 personnel Molody encouraged the Cohens to reveal their activities to the British after their arrest in exchange for a reduced sentence. The Cohens refused and later joined Molody back in Moscow following an exchange. Molody died at the age of 48, within a year of the Cohen's return, after receiving injections from the KGB that he complained were giving him headaches and in circumstances consistent with poisoning. Barnes reveals this information but is silent on what it suggests may have happened.

Finally, Barnes leaves unexplored the subject of Soviet–East European intelligence cooperation, itself a fascinating topic. Barnes indicates intriguingly that following Goleniewski's defection and the implosion of the Portland network, the Soviets blamed their Polish counterparts for poor security and resolved to change their practices when dealing with satellite services, in particular with the Poles, whom they realized were inherently anti-Russian. Had Barnes treated this subject at greater length, he might have cast a well-known case in a fresh, thought-provoking framework. Doing so could have helped *Dead Doubles* resolve the book's uneasy balance between a spy thriller and rote retelling.



The reviewer: Graham Alexander is the pen name of a CIA Directorate of Operations officer currently assigned to the Center for the Study of Intelligence.